

The European Reformation

The Protestant Reformation in Europe is usually said to have begun as the result of the actions of Martin Luther. His opposition to the sale of indulgences resulted in a formal 'protest' when he nailed his 95 theses against indulgences on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. At the time, this was the acknowledged way to begin a disputation; Luther set his arguments against the practice and invited all comers to debate it with him. Later, at the Leipzig disputation of 1519, he defended the Hussites. (More details of this can be found in the extract from Henry Bettenson.)

From an early stage, the Reformation produced a wide variety of Protestant opinions which often provoked division and even hostility between rival groups. Broadly speaking, Protestants in Europe could be divided into three groups:

1. Moderate Protestants such as Luther and Melancthon who were critical of many aspects of traditional Catholic doctrine and practice but generally conservative in their theological and liturgical attitudes;
2. More committed Protestants such as Zwingli and Calvin who rejected a greater proportion of Catholic doctrine than Luther or Melancthon and wanted a church purged of all the traditional practices of medieval Catholicism;
3. Extreme Protestants such as the Anabaptists who were not simply religious radicals but political ones as well. They were often condemned by Protestant groups as well as by the Catholic Church.

The Reformation was felt across the whole of central, northern and western Europe. The only Catholic countries to remain relatively unscathed were Italy, Portugal and Spain. The Eastern Orthodox countries in the Balkans were also largely unaffected.

A Reformation Timeline

1483	Birth of Martin Luther on 10 November
1484	Birth of Huldrych Zwingli on 1 January. Zwingli would become the leader of the Swiss Reformation. He was a controversial figure, attacking Catholic practices, revising the liturgy and translating it into the vernacular. He advocated clerical marriage and the blockading of those Swiss Cantons which remained Catholic. Although he and Luther agreed on many points of doctrine, they disagreed over the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. Luther rejected transubstantiation, which taught that the substance (a technical word whose provenance was in Platonic philosophy) of the elements was changed, but he maintained that the body of Christ was <i>really</i> present on the Communion Table. Zwingli argued that Christ's body had ascended to heaven, thus Christ's presence in the Eucharist was not corporal on the table, but spiritually real in the mind and heart of the believer. Luther famously remarked 'I cannot regard Zwingli and all his teaching as Christian at all.'
1496	Menno Simons (Minne Simens) born (exact date unknown). He trained for the priesthood and was ordained at Utrecht in either 1515 or 1516. By 1527 he was struggling with the doctrine of transubstantiation and turned to the Bible to see whether the scriptures included a justification for it. This was the first time he had studied the Bible, despite his training for the priesthood. In 1531 he became convinced that the Bible did not advocate infant baptism and came into contact with the Anabaptists. He believed them to be misled and fanatical, and he rejected the violence of the Muenster movement. Nevertheless, he was drawn more into Anabaptist circles and on 12 January 1536 he renounced Catholicism and his priestly status, receiving 'rebaptism' soon after. In 1537 he was ordained as an Anabaptist. He advocated separation from this world and helped to establish Anabaptism as a viable, 'radical' alternative to the more conservative Reform movement associated with Luther and Calvin. His followers are known as Mennonites.
1504	Birth of Heinrich Bullinger on 18 July. Bullinger would succeed Zwingli as leader of the Swiss Reformation. As leader of an established reformation, he was not considered a controversial figure, though he was clearly a significant theologian in the Reform movement. Initially intending to join the priesthood, he had been sent to school in 1520 when Europe was being rocked by Luther's protest. After reading Peter Lombard's <i>Sentences</i> (the standard text book for students of theology), he concluded that Luther was more faithful to scripture and the church fathers than Catholic teaching. He returned home and quickly gained a reputation as a powerful preacher. He wrote the Second Helvetic Confession in 1561

	and though intended for private use, it was soon widely adopted among Reformed (i.e. Calvinistic) churches. (The European Reformed churches were – and remain – <i>confessional</i> Churches and the standard of faith, belief and life, are contained in authoritative catechisms and confessions. The Second Helvetic Confession, along with the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, are probably the most widely recognized Reformed confessions, though (particularly English-speaking) Presbyterian churches have tended to give more attention to the Westminster Confession of 1647).
1507	Luther ordained priest at Erfurt.
1509	Henry VIII crowned King of England.
1509	John Calvin (Jean Cauvin) born on 10 July in Noyon, Picardy. Initially trained as a humanist lawyer, he underwent a conversion experience (of which he was reticent) and rejected the Catholic church c.1530. The first edition of his <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> was published in 1536, which brought him to the attention of William Farel at Geneva. The Genevan authorities expelled the two men and Calvin went to Strasbourg at the invitation of another Reformer, Martin Bucer. Eventually he was invited back to Geneva where he became the leader of the church and influential in civic matters. He had cordial relationships with other Reformers including Melancthon and Bullinger, though he is often criticized for his part in the Servetus affair. (Michael Servetus was an anti-Trinitarian who had been condemned as a heretic in Vienne and who arrived at Geneva as a refugee. Calvin denounced him, and the city authorities executed him.) Calvin upheld the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation which led him to espouse the doctrine of double predestination (that God elects some to salvation and others to damnation), though he made less of it than some of his followers.
1510	Luther went to Rome on monastic business. He witnessed the corruption of the church first hand.
1513	Leo X becomes Pope.
1514	John Knox born. The exact date is unknown and it could have been in 1513. Knox was ordained priest in 1536 and sought the reform of the Scottish church, following such early Scottish reformers as George Wishart (c.1513-46), who had popularized the teachings of Calvin and Zwingli in Scotland and had been executed at St Andrews as a heretic. Knox was taken prisoner by French forces and exiled in England where he was a royal chaplain to Edward VI, but he had to flee to the continent during the Marian persecutions. He met Calvin at Geneva and also spent time pastoring the English church at Frankfurt, but left there following disputes over the liturgy. When he returned to

	Scotland, he led the Reformation, instituted a Presbyterian polity and helped to write a confession of Faith.
1515	While teaching on the book of Romans, Luther realizes that salvation is by grace through faith. In other words, it is exclusively the work of God and not achievable through human merit. <i>Sola Fide</i> , <i>Sola Gratia</i> (by faith alone, by grace alone) would become the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation.
1517	Luther nailed his 95 Theses against Indulgences to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg on 31 October. This is usually seen as the first public act of the Reformation.
1519	Charles V becomes Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.
1521	An imperial assembly is called by Charles V to meet at Worms in Germany. The ‘Diet of Worms’ was in session from 28 January to 25 May. Luther was called to the Diet to give an account of his thinking. It was at this assembly that Luther is recorded as saying, on 17 April: ‘Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. [Here I stand. I can do no other.] God help me. Amen.’ There is some doubt that he uttered the bracketed words. On 25 May, Charles issued his ‘Edict’ saying: ‘For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, where upon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.’ Luther had already been excommunicated. The Diet was the secular authority’s attempt to stop the spread of the teaching included in the 95 Theses.
1524	Desiderius Erasmus (c.1469-1536), a noted humanist who had been favourable to Luther’s teaching, publishes <i>Free Will</i> . The book makes clear Erasmus’ continued loyalty to the Scholastic principle ‘do what in you lies’ and thereby to merit salvation through good works. Erasmus is thus confirmed as an enemy of the Reform movement.
1524-5	Stirred by apocalypticism and by the Reform movement, the peasants of Thuringia, Swabia and Franconia band together, intent on armed struggle. They publish their ‘Twelve Demands’ on 16 March 1525 in which they argue for the removal of abuses, the restoration of rights

	and equanimity under the law. Luther reacted with his <i>Admonition to Peace</i> where he argued that the lords and the peasants should settle their disputes amicably in consultation with each other. It was to no avail and the peasants, led by Thomas Muntzer (c.1490-1525) and others, revolted. Luther published <i>Against the Robbing and Murderous Hordes of Peasants</i> in which he exhorted the lords to take full and bloody revenge on the revolutionaries, insisting that those who died fighting for the lords would be rewarded in heaven and those who died fighting for the peasants would spend eternity in hell. The rebellion was brutally suppressed and Muntzer was both tortured and executed.
1525	Luther refutes Erasmus in his <i>The Bondage of the Will</i> . Luther considered the work to be his greatest. In it, he argues forcefully for the inability of sinful human beings to contribute towards their salvation, asserts the sovereignty of God and repeats the idea of predestination as the means of ensuring that God is sovereign in salvation.
1529	The Colloquy of Marburg, 1-4 October. Meeting at Marburg Castle at the behest of Philipp I of Hessen, the colloquy was an attempt to reconcile the opposing views of Luther and Zwingli over the presence at the Lord's Supper. Philipp was seeking the political unity of the Protestant states and to that end believed that religious unity was vital. Other reformers, including Bucer, were also present. The colloquy failed to achieve reconciliation, Luther refusing to recognize Zwingli and his followers as Christian. Nevertheless, in subsequent writing, the two men showed marginally more respect for each other.
1531	Zwingli dies when the Catholic Cantons, the blockading of which he had supported, unexpectedly attack Zurich. Zwingli was killed in the attack, his body burnt and ashes scattered in the wind.
1534	Henry VIII declares himself 'The only supreme head in earth of the Church of England'.
1535	Anabaptists take over Muenster. This is the high point of the radical reformation.
1536	Menno Simons rejects Catholicism and renounces his priestly ordination (12 January).
1536	Erasmus dies on 12 July.
1536	Calvin publishes the first edition of <i>The Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> .
1536	William Tyndale (c.1492-1536) executed by strangulation for heresy, his body subsequently burnt. The traditional date of this is 6 October,

	though there is evidence to suggest that it had occurred some weeks earlier. He had translated the Bible into English, but also opposed Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. He famously prayed, before his execution, that the King of England's eyes be 'opened'.
1540	Catholic Reformation begins with founding of Jesuit order.
c.1543	Conversion of John Knox.
1545	Council of Trent begins on 13 December and continues until 4 December 1563, meeting in Trento, Italy. The Council was convened in order to deal with what were considered to be Protestant heresies. It clarified and defined Church teaching in a variety of areas including, Scripture, Tradition, Sin, Justification, the Sacraments and the veneration of the saints. The Council's work was later enshrined in the Tridentine Creed, issued by Pius IV in 1565; and a number of documents issued by Pius V including the Roman Catechism (1568), a revised Breviary (1568) and a revised Roman Missal (1570). The Mass was standardized and became known as the Tridentine Mass (Tridentum being the Latin name for Trento). This was the last great ecumenical council of the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council, convened in 1962.
1546	Luther dies on 18 February.
1547	Edward VI becomes King of England on 28 January at the age of 9. His reign was concerned with the consolidation of the Reformation in England.
1549	The <i>Consensus Tigurinus</i> brings Zwinglians and Calvinists to agreement about communion.
1553	Mary Tudor becomes Queen of England on 6 July and sets about restoring Catholicism in the realm. Many Protestants flee to the continent and come into contact with the most recent developments in the Reformed movement. Most relocate to Frankfurt, but some make their way to other cities. John Knox is among them, and he spends some time at Geneva where he meets Calvin.
1558	Elizabeth I accedes to the throne of England and the Marian exiles return.
1559	Calvin publishes his fourth and final edition of <i>The Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> .
1559	The Act of Uniformity makes the 1559 Book of Common Prayer the only standard for worship, faith and order in the Church of England. It also requires that all people attend the parish church at least once a week, imposing a fine of 12d on those who did not.

1560	Jacobus Arminius (Latinized form of Jakob Hermanszoon), is born in Oudewater in the Low Countries on 10 October. He rejected the idea of predestination because it confined Christ's work to effecting a predetermined salvation. He emphasized God's foreknowledge rather than his determination and thus reversed the order of election and grace; the Reformed view was that men and women were elected to grace while Arminius suggested that grace enabled a response to the gospel which resulted in the election of men and women to salvation. He rejected the idea of atonement limited to a predetermined elect. His followers, known as Arminians, debated the finer points of theology with Calvinists for the following two centuries and more. Arminius dies on 19 October 1609. His ideas were condemned by the Calvinists at the Synod of Dort, 1618-19.
1560	The Scottish Parliament approves the Scot's Confession, committing the nation to Protestantism. John Knox is one of the authors.
1561	Death of Menno Simons on 31 January.
1563	Council of Trent formally closed on 4 December.
1564	Death of John Calvin on 27 May.
1566	Bullinger writes the Second Helvetic Confession.
1567-8	The Vestoriar Controversy in the Church of England where Puritans rejected the wearing of vestments and certain aspects of ceremony and ritual required by the Book of Common Prayer. After threats of ejection, the Puritans conform.
1571	The 39 Articles of Religion are finalized. They become the standard of faith and order for the Church of England.
1572	St Bartholomew's Day (24 August) massacre of Huguenots in France. The massacre began on 23 August and was aimed at France's Calvinist Protestants. The final figure of casualties is unknown, and modern estimates have varied hugely from 5,000 to 30,000.
1572	Death of John Knox on 24 November.
1575	Death of Bullinger on 17 September.
1582	The General Assembly of Scotland ratifies the Second Book of Discipline.
1596	Moses Amyrald is born. He modifies Calvinism, especially by renouncing the doctrine of limited atonement. Amyraldianism results which became the theology of the School of Saumer in France.

1598	Hugeunots granted a degree of religious freedom by the Edict of Nantes.
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